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Opinion

East Germany, Eritrea, Gaza ... the doctrine of restricting emigration

History shows that authoritarian regimes use emigration control to maintain power. It also shows that mass emigration can destabilize such regimes.

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East German guards look at the hole in the anti-refugee wall where two people broke through and escaped to West Berlin. April 9, 1962. Credit: Getty Images.

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U.S. President Donald Trump's plan to allow Gazans to emigrate from the Gaza Strip is challenging long-standing assumptions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The proposal has faced fierce opposition from Jordan, Egypt, the Arab League and much of the international community. Professional peace negotiators dismissed it as unworkable, unrealistic and immoral. However, it has the potential to dismantle the Hamas regime's power structure and trigger a transformative change in Palestinian political culture.

Like most autocratic regimes, Hamas strictly limits emigration. It knows that a mass exodus would expose its failures at governance. If Gazans were given the freedom to leave, it would undermine the Palestinian mythology of *sumud*—a doctrine of steadfast resistance—and deprive Hamas of manpower and resources. For the sake of peace, Israel and the international community must facilitate the departure of those who wish to escape Hamas's rule.

International law enshrines the right to leave one's country. Article 13.2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, "Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country." The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights echoes this principle; nevertheless, Hamas systematically denies Gazans this fundamental right.

Before the war, a survey by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research found that 44% of Gazan young adults, ages 18 to 29, wanted to emigrate, while 31% of the overall population sought to leave. Despite no official figures, some estimates suggest that 250,000 Gazans have fled since Hamas took control in 2007.

Hamas restricts access to emigration permits while denying mass emigration altogether. Before the Oct. 7 attacks, it granted exclusive rights to the Passport travel agency to issue visas to Turkey—Gaza's top emigration destination. In just one week in September 2023, 19,000 Palestinians applied for Turkish visas, with another 83,000 on the waiting list. Reports indicated that Hamas profited from this monopoly, requiring applicants to meet strict financial conditions. As one Gazan migrant in Greece told *Le Monde* journalists, Passport's monopoly is the result of an agreement with Hamas. To qualify for a visa, applicants had to confirm that they were employed, and had an up-to-date passport and a bank account with at least $1,000.

For those seeking to leave via Egypt's Rafah Crossing, Hamas and Egyptian authorities imposed severe restrictions. Men under 40 were generally forbidden from departing unless they paid exorbitant bribes to

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number of people leaving and returning to the Strip was the same annual average. Recent documents captured from Hamas's Khan Yunis Brigade reveal that the group sees flight as a major danger, prompting ideological campaigns discouraging young people from leaving under the guise of Islamic and nationalist rhetoric.

History demonstrates that authoritarian regimes use emigration controls to maintain power.

One of the most infamous examples was East Germany. In 1961, its leader, Walter Ulbricht, persuaded the Soviets to erect the Berlin Wall, cutting its residents off from the free world. Between 1961 and 1989, East Germany severely limited legal emigration to just 25,000 citizens annually, imprisoning thousands for attempting to escape.

Cuba similarly imposed harsh travel restrictions, treating international movement as a privilege, not a right. Until 2013, Cubans required government permission to leave or return, with professionals, like doctors, facing even stricter controls. Unauthorized travel was criminalized. Those who defected, particularly on government-sponsored missions, were punished with bans on family reunification, reinforcing the regime's grip over its citizens.

Eritrea follows a similarly repressive model, imposing severe restrictions on its citizens' ability to leave the country. Eritreans must obtain an exit visa—a requirement that is rarely granted, especially for those of military service age, as the country enforces indefinite conscription. Unauthorized attempts to flee are met with harsh punishments, including imprisonment, forced labor or even execution at the border. Beyond restricting departures, the government maintains control over expatriates by enforcing a controversial "diaspora tax" and threatening repercussions for their families back home if they fail to comply.

History also shows that mass emigration can destabilize oppressive regimes as it creates public demands for more people to be granted freedom of movement and reveals that displeasure with the government is widespread.

Yet even after Oct. 7, much of the international community appears determined to keep Palestinians confined to the Gaza Strip. In stark contrast, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine saw the European Union swiftly grant millions of Ukrainian refugees legal residency, work permits and access to social services. Similarly, more than 6.5 million Syrians have found refuge in neighboring countries and Europe, with Germany and Sweden accepting hundreds of thousands.

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and manpower, undermining its war effort against Israel. This would serve as a searing indictment of the terror group's decades of misrule, terrorism and repression. Except for the United States, much of the world appears complicit in Hamas's efforts to imprison its people.

Trump's plan puts Hamas on notice. Instead of dismissing it outright, democratic nations should support the voluntary migration of Gazans, weakening Hamas's radical ideology and depriving it of human resources. Only then can Gaza and Palestinian society begin a path toward genuine reconstruction and peace.

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